



Deathly Sure of Ourselves

"There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death."

Proverbs 14:12

"The United States and its allies are on the right side of history."

Condoleezza Rice,

Foreign Affairs, Jan./Feb. 2000

I am not a lawyer by trade, but I too often become one on those occasions when my loving wife finds it necessary to point out my self-centeredness and arrogance. Rather than assume that my sanctification is at stake and therefore invite what she has to say, I leap onto the defensive. Lofty wedding-day notions of unity and submission evaporate. My goal becomes clear: justify myself, prove her wrong, back my position with PowerPoint-like bullets, and close my argument with insinuation that somehow the real problem lies with her. Deluded with a sense of exoneration, I leave the conversation unchanged and unaffected by the fact that my spouse's spirit (and hence our marriage) has taken a severe hit. In the end, her "charges" are proven true. In that ruthlessly unbending irony in the marital relationship, when my goal is to win...I have already lost. We have both lost.

To understand this pitifully common dynamic in my marriage (and perhaps yours) is to understand, in microcosm, an American society increasingly torn asunder by a virulent need to be *right* rather than *one*. Listeners can easily turn to the radiocasts or C-SPAN to hear

the litanies: "The Constitution says I'm right"; "Judicial law says I'm right"; "Natural law says I'm right"; "The 'laws of the market' say I'm right"; "History says I'm right"; "The 'American people' say I'm right"; "My deep, personal faith says I'm right." Citing their authority of choice, American leaders claim to be right about many things that others might consider egregious: torturing human beings, killing babies (and not only fetuses), bombing human populations (whether in the form of military targets or "collateral damage"), manipulating geopolitics by force, favoring the wealthy over the poor, pushing legislation for personal favors, lying (or obfuscating the truth) before the citizenry, to name a few. Regardless of whether such righteous claims are sincere, the refusal to rethink the integrity of our positions further jettisons our nation's slide into unprecendented ugliness.

As people of God, are we any different? Are we truly interested in what God thinks, or are we more inclined to cling to what we're familiar with? The way we typically relate as fellow congregants would indicate the latter. We pick and choose those friends that view the world (or the pastor's flaws) from a common perch. We're quick to critique the delivery of the sermon rather than sit under its judgment. We apply the homily to everyone but ourselves. We keep our distance from those who might speak into our discipleship, and when they do, we employ deflective strategies: "I was hurt by the way you said that"; "It will take time for me to forgive you"; "I hear what you're trying to say, but you fail to grasp the complexity of my situation"; "Your perspective doesn't resonate with me"; "I'm sorry, but that's just who I am"; "I'll pray about it." Confident of our own opinion and resistant to change, we stifle the congregation's mat-

uration toward a community of truth, much less one that is able to speak truth to the larger society.

The stakes are high. In his *New York Times* op-ed plea for fellow evangelicals to repent from supporting our government's war in Iraq, Charles Marsh of the University of Virginia puts it well: "What will it take for evangelicals in the United States to recognize our mistaken loyalty? We have increasingly isolated ourselves from the shared faith of the global church, and there is no denying that our Faustian bargain for access and power has undermined the credibility of our moral and evangelistic witness in the world. The Hebrew prophets might call us to repentance, but *repentance is a tough demand for a people utterly convinced of their righteousness*" (emphasis mine).

What Marsh speaks of is our perilous lack of humility, which deadens our collective ears to Christ's high calling. Rather than having our moral bearings challenged and molded by the gospel, we'll flock like drooling children to the candy wagons of anyone who sounds Christian enough to satisfy our knee-jerk, pietistic sensibilities. This, of course, is good news to the K Street lobbyists (read Indian gambling casinos), neoconservative war planners, and entertainment moguls ("We offer family-friendly films!") eager to capitalize on our self-righteous yet easy-to-please religiosity. The church, rather than shine as a unified light to the world's lost, shall exist only to further their disparate worldly ends. ■

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